



# POINTS AND SIGNALS:

## Mourning a lost opportunity

**The points are set and the signal is at green. After seven years of commenting on the highs and lows in the rail industry, Andrew Goodman signs off with a typically trenchant call for railways to be subject to market forces**

This is the last time I shall be offering up my take on the world of railways within the pages of *Rail Professional*. After establishing the magazine back in December 1996, and taking on the role of editor from 1998 to 2004, I have had the privilege and luxury of my very own soapbox to pontificate on the business of railways. It's a time I have enjoyed immensely but, looking back, it has also been incredibly frustrating.

Regular readers of this column will not be surprised by that. The dominant theme after seven years reporting the rise and fall of privatised railways has been that the benefits have been squandered; in my opinion the finger of blame points squarely at the politicians.

It's ironic that, as someone who back in 1996 pinned their colours and hopes to the concept of privately-run railways, I have reported how the whole thing has slowly and steadily been undermined and taken apart. Throughout the period a Labour government has been wrestling with an inherited model it felt uncomfortable with, but couldn't bring itself to reject outright.

So, instead of reporting the growth of private railways, I have recorded their slow, painful death.

It didn't start that way. In 1996 the industry was on a high, with the last vestiges of the Soviet-style railway structures of nationalised BR swept away and sold off, resulting in something resembling the Klondike gold rush. An apt analogy, perhaps, as the sell-off attracted its fair share of cowboys.

I would be the first to admit that in the way it was conceived and carried out, rail privatisation was far from perfect. Nevertheless,

it provided a tantalising glimpse of the benefits it could bring.

In spite of the election in 1997 of a Labour government that, in opposition, had been pledged to a publicly owned, publicly accountable railway, it seemed nothing could stop the revolution. Amid rocketing share prices and more private investment than for a century, the high point for me was the optimism created by the joint venture between Railtrack and Virgin Trains to transform the west coast main line. For an all-too-brief period the prospect of a genuinely new high-speed railway, encompassing 140mph tilting trains and moving block signalling, seemed a real and exciting prospect.

Such was the unbridled growth of railways in those early days of privatisation, it even seemed logical to have a public body in charge of strategy. With the first franchise renewals programme proposing radical changes across the network, including tunnels under London and new high-speed links, even I could see the sense in John Prescott's proposal for a Strategic Rail Authority.

However, at the same time as the SRA was established, it started to become clear that the privatised railway had been built on sand, not ballast.

So, on reflection, should I really be mourning its passing?

**'There has been a great deal of tinkering and papering-over of the cracks. Change will only come if the state lets go and allows the market to take on the risk of running railways'**

I still believe the answer is yes. I firmly believe it will be impossible to make the step change that is so desperately needed while the rail industry is wedded to the state and dependant on the taxpayer for funding. While other transport modes like air and the car have developed their products and markets, railways in the UK have barely changed. Instead, there has been a great deal of tinkering and papering-over of the cracks. I believe change will only come if the state lets go and allows the market to take on the risk of running railways.

Eurotunnel's staggering £6bn debts are a little less than the mountain of money poured into modernising the west coast network, a fact

overlooked by most commentators. The main difference, of course, is that Eurotunnel is a major headache for the bankers while the west coast debacle has landed firmly in the lap of the taxpayer. I rest my case.

Am I being unfair in blaming politicians for derailing the privatised railway? I don't think so. Their meddling is epitomised by the way the former Transport Secretary, Stephen Byers, forced Railtrack into administration, followed by the resurrection of the corpse of the nationalised railway in the shape of the Frankenstein's monster that is Network Rail.

What does the future hold now for rail? Sadly, I believe we face a period of mediocrity, with little immediate prospect of the large-scale private investment needed as rocket fuel to propel the industry into a new generation. Instead, it will continue to rely on the public purse to fund development or, more likely, to keep it alive.

One thing I can be positive about, however, is the calibre of people that work in the industry, some of whom I have had the pleasure to have met during my time at *Rail Professional*. Sadly, we still appear to be some way off rewarding their dedication with a professional career-development structure.

It's been fascinating for me to interview some of the industry's finest. Two of the most impressive were the late Sir Alastair Morton and

his successor at the SRA, Richard Bowker. Both men had razor sharp minds; both ultimately failed because of the straight-jacket placed on them by political masters. Others who have impressed me – and a lot of other people as well – are Graham Eccles at Stagecoach, Paul Kirk at GTRM (now Carillion) and Richard Brown in his various guises.

Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to thank everyone who helped and supported *Rail Professional* in its first nine years and everyone (or possibly anyone) who has taken the time and trouble to read my scribbling. I look forward to the next nine years, but this time as an interested reader, free of the burden of copy deadlines.